Save the Children

Helping Families Support Children's Success at School

This report outlines the research evidence concerning the forms of family/parental support that impact most positively upon children's development and educational achievement. This two-month project focused on the identification of interventions, programmes and projects aimed at parental/family support that had been most effective in securing improved learning outcomes for children and young people.

The aim of the report is twofold: first, to provide a summary of the most effective forms of family/parental support that make a difference to achievement, particularly in low-income communities; and secondly, based upon the best evidence, to highlight the components of an intervention strategy most likely to impact positively upon children's development and educational achievement.

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Contents

Summary

This report outlines the research evidence concerning the forms of family/parental support that impact most positively upon children's development and educational achievement. This two-month project focused on the identification of interventions, programmes and projects aimed at parental/family support that had been most effective in securing improved learning outcomes for young people. The research incorporated a systematic review of the available international evidence and sought advice from key experts in the field about effective forms of intervention and practice.

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This initial section of the report sets out the parameters of the review and outlines the nature of the search for information on effective forms of family/parental support aimed at raising achievement in low-income families. The report is based on an appraisal of international research evidence conducted through an in-depth review of publication abstracts. It presents key findings from 15 studies judged to be of particular relevance to the questions in this study.

The review was carried out over a relatively short period (July and August 2009) and it focused on evidence from education and social sciences. It is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the literature but rather an overview of the available research that relates to specific review questions.

1. Nature of the evidence base

The evidence identified in this study is extensive and wide ranging. This is an area in which there is a wealth of very diverse literature, both in the UK and elsewhere. However, research in this field varies in quality, as a number of studies of family/parental engagement tend to be non-empirical or overly descriptive. Therefore, great care was taken to include only those studies where there was robust, independently verified evidence of impact of the intervention on subsequent student attainment and achievement.

There was a full range of research methodologies within the selected studies, although there were relatively few examples of systematic reviews of the literature pertaining directly to family support, or of international comparative work relating specifically to the review questions.

A total of 15 sources, out of 26 originally selected, were identified as relevant to the research questions, and included a wide range of interventions. Of the original 26, some were rejected because of a lack of proven impact, some due to methodological issues and limitations, some because the research reported was not sufficiently contemporary, and some because only the abstract could be retrieved. Duplicates, that is those brought up by multiple databases, were also discounted.

Of the sources searched, most were articles, research reports and conference papers, but there were also opinion pieces, policy documents, theory papers and practice descriptions. Very few international comparative analyses of parental/family support approaches exist and even fewer literature reviews were identified through the search. Those that were identified were not particularly robust and therefore care was taken when including these findings in the final study.

A wide range of research designs was also represented across the sources, including detailed case studies and large-scale, longitudinal studies. The most robust research evidence however is to be found in the evidence relating to family support and intervention in the early years. Consequently, an extra weighting is given to such studies in this review,

primarily because the longitudinal research in this area offers the most substantive evidence to date about the nature and outcomes of interventions with families and parents.

The study began by establishing key questions to be addressed and determining the parameters for identifying material relevant to the study topic. The study used a broad range of sources to identify relevant material: searches of bibliographic databases (educational and social sciences); web searches of current research; and recommendations from external experts.

The review consisted of a systematic trawl of academic databases and other sources. The original sifting stage resulted in over 30,000 citations. The databases interrogated were: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), Australian Educational Index (AEI), British Education Index (BEI), Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), along with other sources such as EPPI (Evidence for Policy and Practice Information), the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and databases of academic articles, such as Informaworld, Ingenta, Sage Online, as well as Google Scholar. Search terms used included: parent intervention, parental support, family support, parent support, effective parental support, early years support, and family interventions (the breakdown of these can be found in Appendix 1).

The references were checked and abstracts sought before including them in the study. Each item of literature was assessed, selected for consideration and judged against a range of inclusion criteria: abstract quality (adequacy for making decisions about relevance, type, etc); relevance to research questions; type of literature (eg, research study, policy statement, practice description); country/area involved; design (if research) (eg, programme evaluation, survey, case study); study population (eg, age, role, gender); type of early years setting and/or key area (field of study).

There are several limitations to this study that should be noted. First, the duration of the study was relatively short, which restricted the number of searches that could be carried out. Second, searches were not carried out on psychological and health databases. Third, it was not possible to include any hand searching. Finally, abstracts were often missing from the database searches or were too brief to assess the relevance of the material. In these

cases, attempts were made to locate a summary or full copy of the item, but this was not always possible in the time available.

The findings reported are therefore based on an in-depth examination of 15 sources plus the broader literature on the nature and outcomes of effective family/parental support, which is summarised in the next section.

2. The evidence

The study looked at evidence about family/parental support or intervention from England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada. The review focused particularly on studies where there was evidence of impact and where the research findings were validated and endorsed within the expert research community.

While an assessment or analysis of the nature of existing research is not the purpose of this study, it is worth highlighting that the quantitative research designs tended to use data on children's attainment and this work often used assessment data from children's performance in school tests. In contrast, the qualitative research studies focused on the social barriers to participation and looked at issues of identity, culture and language. The mixed methodologies were those often associated with, but not exclusively so, to large-scale longitudinal studies (Sylva et al, 2005).

Those studies adopting a qualitative research design include action research work in the USA (Hyun et al, 2001) and collaborative action research in the UK (Campbell, 2001), ethnographic interviews (Gordon, 2008), critical discourse analysis (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Armstrong de Almeida, 2006), observations combined with interviews (Anning et al, 2007) and interpretive methods (Wikeley et al, 2006). There are also several experimental studies with control or alternative treatment groups, such as Bagby et al (2005), Konstantopoulos (2008), Miller (2003) and Schroeder (2007).

Some of the large-scale longitudinal studies and programme evaluations in the UK identified as relevant to this study include those focused on intervention in the early years, for

example: the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) (Evangelou et al, 2005), Growing up in Scotland (Anderson, 2007; Bradshaw et al, 2008) and work on the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project summarised in Siraj-Blatchford et al (2008) as well as the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education 3–11 project (EPPE 3–11) (Grabbe et al, 2007) and the Effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) project (Melhuish et al, 2006).

In the USA, studies include the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Lee and Burkam, 2002; Pigott and Israel, 2005) and the Chicago Longitudinal Study (Smokowski, 2004). Several other smaller-scale longitudinal research designs were also identified (for example, Jones and Kinnaird, 2007, in the UK); two USA studies (McCartney et al, 2008; Nitsiou, 2006) and longitudinal action research in Canada (Pelletier and Corter, 2005). These studies are considered in this review because of the quality of the evidence about the impact and outcomes of the interventions.

In the USA, there is a considerable body of literature on family intervention work and poverty and disadvantage, for example Lee and Burkam (2002), McCartney et al (2008), Richards and Dominguez-Arms (2002) and Stipek (2004). In the UK, works such as Siraj-Blatchford (2004) and Wikeley et al (2006) also look at family intervention in areas of disadvantage. Much of this work relates to classroom-based interventions, for example, Bodovski and Farkas (2007), Lindford (2003), Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002), Smyth (2006) and Sylva et al (2007). Other works have focussed on systems-level and policy, such as Deegan (2002), Glennie et al (2005) and Sylva et al (2004).

The empirical evidence clearly shows that parental engagement is one of the key factors in securing higher student achievement and school improvement (Harris and Chrispeels, 2006). The evidence highlights the fact that successful strategies for family involvement often include a community dimension. Therefore, the review draws upon research by Bonshek (2002), Freiberg et al (2005), Gordon (2008) and Kossak (2008).

Longitudinal studies, such as those conducted by Sylva et al (2004), provide the most recent research evidence about the impact of parental engagement on achievement. These studies reinforce the link between parental engagement in *early learning* in school with better

cognitive achievement. In contrast, parental involvement in general school activities confer little or no real benefit on the individual child (Harris and Goodall, 2008).

Mattingly et al (2002) found little empirical support for the widespread claim that parental involvement programmes are an effective means of improving student achievement or changing parent, teacher and student behaviour. Simply being involved with the school has little effect on individual attainment unless there are direct and explicit connections to learning (Ho Sui-Chu and Willms, 1996). This evidence reinforces the view that it is what parents do to *support learning in the home* that makes the difference to achievement. A review of the literature (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003) highlights that there are many factors that directly influence the quality and nature of parental engagement and subsequent impact on student achievement. These will be explored later.

There are several studies that focused on involving parents in particular interventions, both in the UK and in other countries; for example, Sure Start (eg, Malin and Morrow, 2008), Head Start (eg, Dutch, 2005), ELPP (eg, Evangelou et al, 2008), the Tandem Project (McDougall et al, 2000), the Canadian Parenting and Readiness Center programmes (Pelletier and Brent, 2002), the Triple P Positive Parenting Program (Australia) (Ralph and Sanders, 2003 and 2008) and the Sutton Trust Evaluation Project (Sylva et al, 2008b).

Developing effective approaches to work with parents was often supported by practice-based publications relating to ways that practitioners can work with parents (eg, Whalley, 2007; Pattnaik, 2003) and improving parent–teacher partnerships (eg, Billman et al, 2005; Boutte et al, 2003). There is also considerable literature on family support and care for different population groups (the ways and extent to which these groups engage with the transition from home into school); for example, Lundgren and Morrison (2003), Rosenthal (2003), Sanagavarapu and Perry (2005), Sims and Hutchins (2001), Takanishi (2004), Tyler (2005) and Waanders et al (2007).

Research on how particular settings can support family engagement in young children's learning is also extensive; for example, early years centres (Kirk, 2003), extended schools (Apps et al, 2006) and out-of-home integrated care and education settings (Penn et al,

2004), home visiting (eg, Greenfield, 2006) and other outreach work (eg, Sylva et al, 2008b and National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2006).

Another broad theme concerns disadvantage and deprivation. This literature focuses on childhood risk factors associated with poverty, their relationship with educational development and the impact of family support, particularly in the early years, for children with low socio-economic status (including school readiness); for example, Bagby et al (2005), Blow et al (2005), Lindford (2003), McCartney et al (2008), McIntosh et al (2007), Schechter and Bye (2007) and Siraj-Blatchford (2004). The issue of the quality and type of provision in association with socio-economic status, including issues of affordability, access and family involvement in early years services, is explored in a range of literature including, for example, Matthews and Ewen (2006), Smith et al (2005), Sylva et al (2004), Urwin (2003) and Waanders et al (2007).

3. Overview of evidence

It is estimated that millions of children are not reaching their full potential in mental and social development owing to extreme poverty, and poor health and nutrition. Many factors such as parental care, stimulation, stress, nutrition and environmental toxins can have long-term effects on brain development and function. Low levels of parental education and increased stress can lead to poor parenting skills, poor child health and nutrition, and a learning environment with limited stimulation.

Research has shown that children who are born into poor families or are malnourished in the first two years of life have poorer levels of educational attainment or cognitive function; one study showed poorer mental health might be associated with these factors. Low levels of educational attainment lead to poor employment opportunities and reduced income in adulthood, and poverty is transmitted to the next generation. By preventing the loss of developmental potential that affects millions of children worldwide it is possible to interrupt the cycle of poverty and help to promote equity in society.

Systematic interventions demonstrate what is possible. Family-based support is now recognised as a central feature of successful outcomes for young children in high-poverty

areas. It is one of the most significant contributors to children's continued success in the education system, particularly during periods of educational transition when families may need greater support (Quinton, 2004; Sylva et al, 2004; Evangelou et al, 2005; National Evaluation of Sure Start, 2008; Sanders, 2003, 2008; McDonald and Moberg et al, 2006).

A specific emphasis on family learning within outreach and family-based support programmes can also support and enhance relationships between practitioners and family members and between family members and children, leading to achievement and enjoyment for children and families (Smith, 2006).

Effective interventions

There have been a number of initiatives, internationally, that have focused considerable resources on family/parental support. Strands of current policy and practice development in many countries emphasise family/parental support. Since the launch of the *Every Child Matters: Change for Children Programme*, the significance of parenting in improving child outcomes has become increasingly central to policy formation on family issues. The *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (NSF)* sets out a number of standards to improve outcomes for children. Standard Two focuses on parenting and taking steps to ensure parents receive the information, services and support that will help them to help their children. This includes plans to train and qualify the children's workforce in skills and knowledge related to family-based support and provision of support for outreach workers within Children's Centres. Parental involvement is mandated in the US federal government's No Child Left Behind Act, and given a high priority in its framework (US Department of Education, 2005).

In England there has been a range of initiatives aimed at family support and parental engagement in learning. In 2006 the DCSF launched the Parent Support Adviser (PSA) Pilot to support 20 local authorities to introduce PSAs into their workforce. The evaluation of this work (Lindsay et al, 2008) has indicated some positive outcomes from this initiative, but there is the issue of sustainability beyond the pilot year.

In 2006 the Engaging Parents to Raise Achievement (EPRA) project sponsored by the DCSF worked with over 100 secondary schools to develop ways of securing the greater

involvement of parents. The evaluation showed that there was widespread success in engaging parents in their children's learning at many schools but such gains were often short lived and did not endure once the funding disappeared or the imperative for action was withdrawn (Harris and Goodall, 2007; Catsambis, 2001).

The study also looked at a number of early interventions where there was evidence of impact. For example, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study is a scientific experiment in the US that has identified the short- and long-term effects of a high-quality, interactive preschool education programme for young children living in poverty (Schweinhart et al, 2005). The study shows evidence of programme effects on important life outcomes. The conclusion from this study and several others like it (for example, Reynolds et al, 2001) is that high-quality early childhood programmes for young children living in poverty in the US contribute to their development in childhood and their school success, adult economic performance and reduced commission of adult crime, and also return high benefits relative to their initial cost.

Recent reviews have also looked at both small-scale studies and large-scale programmes in low-resource countries, and found evidence of improved early development in children who participated in them (Walker et al, 2007; Sylva, Melhuish et al, 2004; Melhuish et al, 2006). These studies demonstrate that the most effective interventions were: comprehensive (health, nutrition and development); targeted at younger and disadvantaged children; and of longer duration, greater intensity and higher quality. Providing services directly to children and including an active parenting and skill-building component is a more effective strategy than providing information alone. A recent Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) study (Harris and Allen, 2009) also confirmed that effective multi-agency provision has a greater impact when the provision is targeted at individual need.

The 'Programme for the Improvement of Education, Health and the Environment' (now PROMESA) was a small-scale, community-based early childhood initiative began in Choco, a very isolated area of Colombia, that encouraged the active participation of children and adults in the solution of their own and their community's problems. The main thrust of this work was to stimulate the development of young children; mothers attended weekly sessions run by 'promoters' to learn about toys and games (based mainly on local culture

and materials) so that they could support the learning and development of their children at home. Older siblings were also involved and a child-to-child component was developed as part of the project. The project found that as mothers saw how their children developed through play they became even more enthusiastic about what they were doing. Fathers and other family members became involved and, in time, the whole community participated in different areas of the work (Arango et al, 2004). By 1989, 36% of the PROMESA children reached 5th grade, compared to 12% in 1980; many of them went to secondary school and even university. Infant mortality during the first five years fell from 11.7% in 1980 to 7.6% in 1989.

The 'Mother–Child Education Programme' in Turkey was one of the first experimental studies outside North America to demonstrate the long-term effects of an early childhood programme. It was distinctive in targeting disadvantaged mothers in order to bring about change in the immediate environment that affects their children's development. It has now developed into a national non-governmental organisation (NGO), the Mother–Child Education Foundation (AÇEV), implemented through a nationwide programme run by the Turkish Ministry of National Education. Several different approaches have been adopted in the implementation of the programme. The evidence shows that children who attended preschool made more cognitive and social/behavioural progress than those who remained at home. Although parents' social class and levels of education were related to child outcomes, the stimulation provided in the child's early home learning environment was an even more important influence.

EPPE is the largest study in Europe on the effects of preschool education on children's intellectual, social and behavioural development (Sylva et al, 2004). It provides sound evidence on the impact of different types and amounts of preschool provision after taking into account children's characteristics and their home background. The study found that children who attended preschool made more cognitive and social/behavioural progress compared to those who remained at home. Although parents' social class and levels of education were related to child outcomes, the stimulation provided in the child's early home learning environment was an even more important influence. Both the quality and duration of preschool are important for children's development. Every month of preschool

after age two is linked to better cognitive development and improved independence, concentration and sociability.

Effective interventions with families/parents

Family support encompasses a wide range of interventions aimed at promoting parental involvement. They include home-visiting programmes, parent training/parenting skills programmes, cognitive/knowledge development programmes and programmes to tackle mental health among parents, those aimed at enhancing home–school links and those related to family and community education. Services may also wrap care and education together, and such integration also raises issues of definition. There is evidence that both the home learning environment and the quality of preschool learning positively impact on children's development.

The inherent diversity of the population, alongside the potential negative consequences of lack of integration, can lead to compartmentalisation and disconnection from mainstream services, thus creating a barrier to engagement, which needs to be addressed. While provision targeted at specific populations is recognised as important, services that include children from a range of social backgrounds can benefit children from socially disadvantaged groups who attend.

Research on parents' emotional capital demonstrates quite clearly the advantages that middle-class parents have in securing better educational provision and outcomes. Drawing on fieldwork from a study of mothers' involvement in their children's primary schooling, Ball's (1998) work examines mothers' emotional engagement with their children's education. The findings tentatively conclude that the relationships between educational success, emotional capital and emotional wellbeing, and the extent of overlap and difference between them, explains how certain groups persistently face a range of disadvantages. This work also suggests that certain barriers are being manufactured in the contemporary educational marketplace and that as educational levels rise for those with lower educational aspirations, individuals with positional ambition improve their education further in order to maintain a relative advantage (Ball, 1998).

Minority ethnic parents are likely to be disproportionately affected by barriers such as distance, cost and lack of time. Language is a significant barrier for some minority ethnic parents wishing to access early years services. Locally based services that are accessible by public transport and/or to those with specific mobility needs are important and the implications of rural living should be considered by policy-makers. Fathers also face particular barriers; these include lack of awareness, female-oriented content of involvement programmes and time constraints (Bayley, Wallace et al, 2009). Minority children also face different aspirational barriers (Hill, Ramirez et al, 2003).

Institutional structures can act as social barriers, which will be different for parents/carers from black and minority ethnic communities, disabled parents, fathers, parents living in poverty and those with very young children or babies. Similarly, cultural differences can play a part. For example, notions of partnership between parents, child and provider may not be familiar for parents from some cultures and countries, and language barriers can exacerbate misunderstandings.

Minimum levels of intervention and voluntary, rather than compulsory, approaches are generally favoured for supporting meaningful engagement with parents. Engagement should be viewed as a continuous process and strategies should be targeted at different stages of participation, such as access, building working relationships, maintaining involvement and educational transition.

Overcoming barriers

Developing trust within communities is a way of overcoming barriers. This is best achieved by securing the involvement of parents and other community members in developing and designing local interventions in order to secure support for the project when it moves into implementation (Wigfall, 2006). It is important for staff to establish trusting relationships with parents/carers, and to support and maintain those relationships by getting to know individual families and regularly contacting them about children's progress and learning (Moran et al, 2004).

Early childhood education practice must be sensitive to differences in home culture. It must work to the strengths of these differences, supported by the evidence that culturally specific programmes improve minority ethnic families' attendance (Dutch, 2005).

Caution should be exercised when considering the transferability of specific strategies or interventions to different contexts and countries (Penn et al, 2004). The evidence to support the case for the benefits of integrated services is not overly strong, particularly in terms of cost effectiveness (Penn et al, 2004).

The next section looks at findings from the 15 studies identified as providing robust evidence about the principles of validated good practice to support low-income families that impact on raising the achievement of their children.

4. Evidence of impact

This section outlines the research findings about interventions that have shown clear evidence of impact on children's achievement. The characteristics of the 15 studies selected for more in-depth scrutiny were as follows: they had mixed methodologies; they had a robust means of determining impact; most had control groups; and most controlled for factors such as birthweight, socio-economic status, etc (see Appendix 2). The findings from each of these studies will now be outlined.

Asscher et al (2007) report findings from their examination of the Home-Start programme. Although their work was not intended to be a direct evaluation of the programme, but rather an analysis of the efficacy of those predictors often assumed to be valid for the impact of such programmes, the work is useful in suggesting that low-impact interventions that are non-directive (and allow agency to remain with the parent) may be more effective than high-intensity interventions. The greatest impact for the Home-Start programme was seen in families who were judged to be 'low risk' – higher incomes and higher maternal educational status (Asscher, Hermanns et al, 2008).

Brody et al (2004) report on an evaluation of a rural implementation of the Strong African American Families (SAAF) programme. SAAF is preventive in nature, aiming to reduce early

alcohol use and sexual activity. The programme worked with mothers of 11-year-old children and with the children themselves. For parents, the emphasis of the programme was on communicative, regulated parenting and for children it focused on the value of regulated household life, coping strategies, and the effects of early alcohol use and sexual activity. The evaluation showed positive impact around parenting behaviours and factors that protect young people from early onset of alcohol use and sexual activity. The evaluation was statistically rigorous, but short term, examining impact for only four months after the end of the programme (Brody et al, 2004).

Chang et al (2009) evaluated the impact of the Home-Start programme on three different groups of families, with a fourth group as a control/reference group. Their emphasis was on the evaluation of parenting practices and their subsequent impact on children's cognitive development. Overall, group socialisation and parenting classes increased the amount of stimulation parents provided for their children in the home. Parent support groups in particular increased supportive rather than intrusive parenting in the home and this was particularly the case for non-English speaking Hispanic mothers. The stimulation given by parents for cognitive and language development had a clear impact on their children's development.

The work by Evangelou and Sylva (2003) focuses on PEEP – the Peers Early Education Partnership. This programme works with disadvantaged children from birth to five years old. The main aim of the programme is to raise educational attainment, particularly literacy. Sessions are offered weekly, centring on listening, talking and playing, supporting parents as the first educators of their children. After two years of participation in the project, there were clear gains for children in language, literacy, numeracy and self-esteem; children aged four and five showed clear gains in language, literacy and self-esteem (Evangelou and Sylva, 2003).

McDonald et al (2006) report on a trial of two forms of parental involvement for Latino families in the United States. Children were assigned either to a 'multi-family afterschool support group' or they received parenting leaflets. There was high engagement for those families offered the afterschool programme, which the authors point out may reflect the cultural norms of the target community. Two years after the interventions took place,

scores for behaviour and academic performance were obtained from teachers, who were not aware of which children had been involved with either of the programmes. The authors found statistically significant results in favour of the multi-family support groups rather than the programme of leaflets with follow-up. Although this research shows definite impact for one programme over the other, it is not clear about the exact parameters of the leaflet-based programme, and neither group of children was compared to a similar group who received no such intervention (McDonald, Moberg et al, 2006).

In a parallel project to the EPPE study, Melhuish et al (2006) investigated the longer-term effects of preschool education on a sample of over 800 children to the end of Key Stage 1. A control group of students was used. They found that preschool experience has a beneficial impact on the cognitive and social development of all children, with disadvantaged children benefitting more when interventions include children from different settings. The best results come from nursery schools and classes, followed by playgroups. High quality of provision was associated with trained and qualified staff. The environment in the home around learning was more important for all children than parental occupation, education or income. The report concluded that, "all parents, including those with low income and/or few qualifications, can improve their children's progress and give them a better start at school by engaging in activities that engage and stretch the child's mind" (Melhuish and Quinn et al, 2006).

Orchard's (2007) research focused on the provision of a parenting course for parents of Year 7 children at one school over three years. Participants were from an economically deprived part of the UK. Results showed that, compared to a control group, there were reports of qualitative improvements in parenting and child behaviour. The small sample size, however, may have militated against finding statistically significant quantitative impacts. Although the work reported by Orchard is small scale, it is nonetheless indicative of the impact that parenting programmes can have, particularly at the transition points between primary and secondary school (Orchard, 2007).

Ralph and Sanders (2006) offer evaluative evidence of the 'Teen Triple P Positive Parenting Program' – an intervention that ranges from group sessions through to self-directed learning and telephone support. The programme was originally designed for much younger children

but subsequently offered to parents of 12–13-year-olds. Qualitative evaluations one year after the programme began showed that there were significant improvements in the behaviour of the children involved; parents also reported significantly less disruptive behaviour (Ralph and Sanders, 2006).

Reynolds et al (2004) draw upon the considerable dataset of over 1,400 children in a deprived, rural part of the United States, to investigate the effects of participation in Child Parent Centres. Although parental involvement is only one part of a larger, school-based programme for children aged three to nine years, the research found support for the hypothesis that family and school support are vital for children's educational attainment (in this case, completion of secondary education) and for the reduction of delinquent behaviour (Reynolds et al, 2004).

Sanders et al (2003, 2008) report on the Triple P Positive Parenting Program. This programme supports parents from their child's birth through to adolescence, and has a range of intervention strategies from mass media to individual support. The aim of the programme is the development of self-regulation, so that parents function as problem solvers, have the requisite social skills and can build adequate relationships (Sanders, 2008). Sanders and colleagues outline the outcomes of a controlled trial of the media-based intervention for mothers of children between two and eight years old. Mothers in the group who received the TV and printed programme reported a reduction in behavioural difficulties with their children, and a sense of their improved ability to parent. Mothers in the intervention group displayed a reduction in dysfunctional parenting; these results were shown four to six months after the intervention (Sanders, 2003).

Smith (2006) reports on the outcome of working with members of the local community in setting up a new school. The school setting incorporated a number of community services (full service school, similar to an extended school). In this work, engaging parents meant more than just helping in the classroom; the emphasis shifted to include learning in the home, and changing attitudes toward learning in the home. Parents reported greater self-confidence as a result of the communication and support from the school plus greater dedication to homework. The main benefit of parents' greater involvement was reported to be increased academic achievement (Smith, 2006).

Sylva and colleagues (2003) report an evaluation finding concerning the impact of preschool education. A range of sources was used to determine impact on a sample of 3,000 children, measured against a control group. Overall, they found that preschool experience was beneficial to children and these benefits could still be discerned at the end of Key Stage 1. The earlier children began preschool, the more impact it had; longer attendance was linked to improved academic skills at the end of Key Stage 1. The quality of provision was better in settings that combined care and education, and this high-quality provision was related to higher levels of intellectual and behavioural development. This research found that, "the quality of the home leaning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. What parents do is more important than who parents are" (Sylva, Melhuish et al, 2008).

In a subsequent study, Sylva, Scott et al (2008) investigated a multi-component programme aimed at supporting parents to help their five- and six-year-old children to read. All of the children involved in the programme were judged to be 'at risk' of exclusion through antisocial behaviour. There was no direct reward for taking part, yet uptake by parents and continuity of engagement within the programme was good. The research showed that children's reading skills improved in the intervention group, as did the quality of parents' interaction with their children, particularly around reading. The research showed that the programme was able to support families who are often absent from traditional parenting programmes, suggesting that such multi-part programmes can be used successfully at school (Sylva, Scott et al. 2008).

Wigfall (2006) reports on a community project called Families in Focus, which has had short-term positive impact, and is expected to have longer-term impact on a deprived inner-city area of the UK. The project has the stated aim of helping those living close to each other to become supportive communities. It engages first with young people, taking up where Sure Start ends, supporting young people aged from four to 16. The programme begins with the children and then works with families, rather than beginning with adults and working through them to children. The Families in Focus programme is not specifically aimed at academic achievement but aims to reduce social exclusion. The short-term effects of the programme have been shown to be positive. These include increased confidence as

reported by young people, greater visibility of young people on the estate, greater respect reported for the community itself. Funding for the programme has been extended and the programme is being extended to other areas of the city (Wigfall, 2006).

5. Summary of findings

The evidence shows that the *earlier* the intervention, the better and more durable the outcome for the child. A small investment in the early years can make a significant impact later on. Also, the evidence shows that it is important to offer parents/carers and children multiple entry routes into targeted support and various choices of provision. Support at transition periods – into primary school, into secondary school – is particularly important and can make a significant difference to subsequent attainment.

Factors that contribute to the success of family/parental support include: multi-dimensional interventions and delivery modes that address more than one facet of children's lives and meet the needs of a wide range of users; investment in high-quality staff training and qualifications, including volunteers; locally driven provision based on consultation and involvement of parents and local communities; a focus on implementation factors; and working together with parents, families and children. The benefits of targeting interventions on socio-economically disadvantaged groups are shown to be particularly strong.

For all children, the quality of the home learning environment at preschool stage is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. In other words, it matters what parents do, rather than who they are. So providing support that translates into improvement in the quality of *parent–child interaction* is likely to make the most difference to subsequent achievement.

The evidence suggests that the principles of validated good practice are: early intervention, or intervention at *transition periods*; a specified programme; targeted resources; clear evaluative mechanisms; and feedback processes. What matters for positive outcomes are: the quality of staff–child interactions; the learning resources available; having programmes that engage children; and the existence of a supportive environment for children and parents to work together. The quality and effectiveness of the preschool attended make a significant

difference to longer-term developmental outcomes for all children throughout their primary education (Sammons et al, 2008).

Four main research questions

The findings from this review will now be summarised under the four main research questions:

1. What are the principles of validated good practice that support low-income families to impact on raising the achievement of their children?

- Intervention in the *early years* and *preschool* intervention
- Providing support for parents to assist their child's learning *in the home*
- Bringing the *home and school closer* through out-of-hours clubs, parent classes, extended schools and outreach work
- Services and support targeted directly *at individual children's needs*
- Family-based *multi-agency* support that encompasses health, education, social services
- *Voluntary* rather than compulsory engagement in design, delivery and sustainability
- Parent up-skilling and focused support for *literacy or numeracy*
- Emphasis on school *transition points* and helping parents to support children through the various phases of education

2. What are the current barriers hindering the development and implementation of effective low-income family support strategies (at government, school and community level)

- Multifaceted nature of low-income families – cultural, ethnic and religious differences
- Need for *community ownership* of projects – this can be difficult and time consuming
- Early years support and preschool are *expensive* options
- Failure of previous initiatives and interventions have created *low levels of trust* within certain communities
- Need for targeted interventions and differentiation of approach – this can be *resource heavy*

3. What are the possible ways of eliminating the barriers that are hindering the development and implementation of effective low-income family support strategies (at government, school and community level)?

- Develop a model of effective intervention that communities can *own and sustain*
- Develop an intervention programme based on *what works* and with a clear evidential base
- Secure parental representation, *trust and commitment* early on in any intervention
- Involve those parents *working within* the school as ambassadors for the intervention

4. Recommended potential interventions that would cost £2 million for UK-wide delivery and robustly evidence clear impact of intervention.

- As there are many effective early years interventions, it would not be cost effective to *replicate* this form of intervention.
- The next best intervention, ie, to achieve maximum impact, is to focus *on transition phases* – particularly into primary and into secondary school.
- A project that aimed to support low-income parents in helping children with *phases of transition* is likely to reap significant benefits.
- Evidence shows that it is at these critical transition points that any previous gains in achievement can be *lost or diminished*. This is particularly the case in the transition from *primary to secondary* school.
- The challenges of handling a new environment often proves *too difficult* for children from low-income families, who may not have the social capital or social ability to integrate effectively into a complex and potentially threatening new school setting.
- With effective intervention at these transition points and *targeted support* for parents, teachers and children, the likelihood of truancy, exclusion and conscious *disengagement* (because of the challenges of entering a new school) could be significantly reduced.
- Evidence shows a strong relationship between truancy and low academic attainment. Therefore, supporting vulnerable young people from low-income families *at critical transition points in their schooling* (particularly between primary and secondary school) in order to keep them in school is a potentially powerful intervention.

- A *random controlled trial approach* would provide robust evidence of the impact of such an intervention.
- The intervention would be aimed at giving young people and their parents much *greater resilience* to setbacks, challenges and unfamiliar settings through information, support and coping strategies.

It is clear that a child's learning life course is determined by a unique combination of experiences and events. Some disadvantages (or risk factors) can potentially lead to underachievement, while others (resilience factors) provide an individual child with the resources to overcome these disadvantages (Masten, 2001; Luthar, 2003).

Parents can pass both risks and resilience on to their children, thereby creating social and economic mobility, immobility or inertia across generations. But the various risk and resilience factors interact in complex ways so that very different life events and experiences may lead to similar outcomes, yet life events and experiences that appear very similar may lead to quite different learning outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

For most children, poverty and the associated adversities present the greatest risks, notably because these impact on adequacy of nutrition and limit the quality of the early home learning environment (Walker et al, 2007). Other children face the early challenges of mental or physical injury or disability, or the effects of discrimination or family trauma. Children's resilience may be supported through multiple strategies, through the quality of learning in the home, through family support intervention, through effective support at different phases of school transition and through the provision of high-quality preschool education.

The lessons from this study are very clear- strengthening the ability of families and communities to attend to young people's physical, emotional, cognitive and psychological needs must be the prime goal of any intervention programme. With appropriate training and follow-up, parents from high poverty communities and those with low educational levels can support the learning of their children. By helping parents and their children to successfully navigate different phases of schooling, exclusion and truancy become less likely and effective

learning much more likely. The next section offers some ideas and possibilities that could aid the design of such a programme.

6. Design features

The transition from primary school to secondary school comes at a time when students are experiencing changes associated with their development from childhood to adolescence. In social and emotional terms, they are at a point in their life when they are least able to cope with major change. Understanding the nature and the development needs of young adolescents and supporting them through this period can make a significant different to their subsequent attainment.

Research has identified their developmental needs as:

- intellectual – young adolescent learners are curious, motivated to achieve when challenged and capable of problem-solving and complex thinking
- social – there is an intense need to belong and be accepted by their peers while finding their own place in the world. They are engaged in forming and questioning their own identities on many levels
- physical – they mature at different rates and experience rapid and irregular growth, with bodily changes causing awkward and uncoordinated movements
- emotional and psychological – they are vulnerable and self-conscious, and often experience unpredictable mood swings
- moral – they are idealistic and want to have an impact on making the world a better place.

Successful transition from primary to secondary schooling is significantly linked to social capital and parents' ability to assist the transition process. For many low-income parents, the daily pressures of life and their own experience of schooling mean that they are often ill equipped to help their children with the transition into secondary school and find it difficult to deal with the developmental issues facing young adolescents. Therefore, structured assistance for parents at the transition stage will help them to help their children.

Four stages of transition

The transition phase covers the broad period of time from preparing to move from primary school until successful settlement of the student in secondary school. Plans to support transition need begin in Year 5, or even earlier, to create an environment that promotes a confident transition from the primary school classroom to the secondary school classroom. Within any intervention programme, four stages of transition need to be considered.

- **Preparation** – carefully planned activities during primary school can prepare students and their parents for secondary school. These activities should provide information and support for students and parents about the nature of secondary education and the options available.

- **Transfer** – the most common transfer activities include student/parent meetings and visits to the new secondary school. However, social and emotional support during this period is of paramount importance, particularly for many low-income groups who will find the prospect daunting.

- **Induction** – upon entry into Year 7, secondary schools typically provide a variety of programmes intended to orientate students and parents to the expectations and operation of the school. These programmes need to offer support for learning and the social and personal aspects of transition.

- **Consolidation** – as transition activities eventually merge into the secondary school's overall student welfare and support programmes, late Year 7 and early Year 8 present an opportunity to introduce activities specifically designed to provide students with the means of managing their own learning. Again, there should be structured opportunities to engage parents in the development of skills and strategies to support their children's learning.

A transition programme that incorporates these four phases (preparation, transfer, induction and consolidation) is essential for students to experience effective transition from

primary school to secondary school. Equally as important are the *five areas* of action for transition, which are outlined next.

Five main categories of activity

There are five main categories of activity that need to be incorporated into any effective transition programme. These categories, or areas of action, are presented here with a specific focus on parents:

- **Administrative** – information given to primary school students and their parents about the nature of secondary schooling, the operation of secondary schools and the expectations of their local secondary schools. This information may need to be provided in various forms and languages.

- **Social and personal** – developing positive social relationships within the student and parent group involved in transition, focusing attention on issues of anxiety and stress, extending students' and parents' knowledge about secondary school, and building the personal confidence of each student. It is important that positive relationships develop between students, their parents or caregivers and the new school, typically during the preparation, transfer and induction phases of transition (Years 5 to 7).

- **Curriculum** – familiarising students and parents with the new curriculum, new subjects and the patterns of work expectations. Offering parents skill-based workshops and support sessions around the curriculum.

- **Pedagogy** – developing strategies to help parents to support their children to learn most effectively and to access the forms of teaching they will experience in secondary school. Greater alignment of teaching practices in late primary school and early secondary school reduces the possibility of a decline in student achievement in Years 7 and 8.

- **Management of learning** – encouraging students to develop independent learning and reflection skills. Encouraging parents to support independent learning and to motivate their children to learn. Empowering students with information

about learning and achievement (including learning how to learn) and developing the confidence to articulate individual learning needs and engage in learning in the new environment.

The design of any intervention focused on the transition phase should ideally contain activities linked together to ensure that the *four phases of transition* and the *five areas of action for transition* are incorporated. In addition, the programme should be developed with a clear focus on the needs of students and their parents not just on the needs of the school or teachers. The majority of transition programmes focus on the academic transition rather than the social, emotional and behavioural dimensions of transition.

The evidence in this review suggests that the barriers to achievement by low-income families tend to be social, emotional and behavioural rather than cognitive. Many low-income children enter secondary school with high levels of cognitive ability, but because of their social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and those of their families, they fail to reach their potential (Hill and Ramirez, 2003). A lack of social and coping skills can often lead young people to be frustrated, disruptive, abusive and even violent. With adequate preparation for transition, and the active development of coping skills and strategies for managing anxiety, conflict, etc, the possibilities of exclusion or removal to another school could be reduced.

Developing an effective, comprehensive program of transition for low income students (and their families) is one step forward in keeping children in school and keeping them learning. If they are in school they the chance to attain and achieve. Most importantly, they are likely to have better life chances.

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Appendix I – Table of Sources

Table I. Overview of searches source		Items found†	Items selected for consideration	Items identified as relevant to this study
Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)			**9**	**6**
	Parent Intervention	10		
	Parental Support	233		
	Family Support	735		
	Parent Support	59		
	Effective Parental Support	0		
	Early Years Support	1		
	Parent Interventions			
	Family Intervention	163		
Australian Education Index (AEI)			**2**	**1**
	Family/Parent Intervention	16		
	Parental Support	53		
	Family Support	119		
	Effective Parental Support	1		
	Early Years Support	0		
	Parent Interventions	2		
British Education Index (BEI)			**2**	**1**
	Family Intervention	5		
	Parental Support	12		
	Family Support	26		
	Effective Parental Support			
	Early Years Support	1		
	Parent Interventions	3		

Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)			**4**	**2**
	Family Intervention	102		
	Parental Support	443		
	Family Support	407		
	Effective Parental Support			
	Early Years Support	1		
	Parent Interventions			
Organisations EPPI				
	Family Intervention	88		
	Parental Support			
	Family/Parent Support			
	Effective Parental Support			
	Early Years Support			
	Parent Interventions	99		
DCSF			**5**	**4**
	Family Intervention			
	Parental Support	7		
	Family/Parent Support			
	Effective Parental Support			
	Early Years Support			
	Parent Interventions			
Informaworld				
	Family/Parent Intervention			
	Parental Support	1,901		
	Parental Support + low income	3		
	Family Support	316		
	Family Support + low income	27		
	Effective Parental Support			
	Early Years Support			
	Parent Interventions			
Ingenta			**1**	**1**
	Family/Parent Intervention			

	Parental Support	1,660		
	Parental Support + low income	1		
	Family/Parent Support			
	Effective Parental Support			
	Early Years Support			
	Parent Interventions			
Sage Online			**1**	**0**
	Family/Parent Intervention			
	Parental Support	21,056		
	Parental Support + low income	2,911		
	Family/Parent Support			
	Effective Parental Support			
	Early Years Support			
	Parent Interventions			
Google Scholar			**3**	**2**
Total		30,461	**27**	**17**

Appendix 2 – Intervention matrix

Source	Age group	Multi family	Community focus	School focus	Other programme	Low income	Fathers	Mothers	Achievement	Parenting	Child behaviour	Control group
1. Asscher, J. et al (2007) 'Predicting the effectiveness of the Home-Start Parenting Support Program', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 29(2), 247–63.	0 - 6 years				Home Start					X		X
2. Brody, G.H. et al (2004) 'The Strong African American Families Program: translating research into prevention programming', *Child Development*, 75(3), 900–17.	11 year-olds	X	X		SAAF	X		X		X	X	X

3. Chang, M., Park, B. et al (2009) 'Parental involvement, parenting behaviors, and children's cognitive development in low-income and minority families', *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 23(3): 309–24.	0 - 3	X			Head Start	X				X		X
4. Evangelou, M. and Sylva, K. (2003) *The Effects of the Peers Early Educational Partnership (PEEP) on Children's Developmental Progress* (DfES Research Report 489), London: DfES .	3 - 5 years	X	X	X	PEEPS	X			X		X	X
5. McDonald, L., Moberg, D.P. et al (2006) 'After-school multifamily groups: a randomized controlled trial involving low-income, urban, Latino children', *Children &*	6 - 14 years	X				X			X	X	X	

Schools, 28(1), 25–34												
6. Melhuish, E., Quinn, L. et al (2006) *Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Summary Report*, Department of Education.	Pre-school	X							X		X	X
7. Orchard, L. (2007) 'Evaluating parenting classes held at a secondary school', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 12: 91–105.	11 – 12 years old					X			X	X	X	X
8. Ralph, A. and Sanders, M. (2006) 'The Teen Triple P Positive Parenting Program: a preliminary evaluation,' *Youth Studies Australia*: 41–8	12 - 13 years old			X	Triple P	X				X		X

9. Reynolds, A.J., Ou, S.-R (2004) 'Paths of effects of early childhood intervention on educational attainment and delinquency: a confirmatory analysis of the Chicago child-parent centers', *Child Development*, 75(5), 1299–1328	3 - 9 years (impact up to 20)			X	CPC	X			X	X	X	X
10. Sanders, M.R. (2003) 'Triple P-Positive Parenting Program: a population approach to promoting competent parenting', *Australian E-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, 2(3)		X	X		Triple P			X		X	X	X
11. Sanders, M.R. (2008) 'Triple P-Positive Parenting Program as a public health approach to strengthening parenting', *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(3), 506–17					Triple P					X	X	

12. Smith, J.G. (2006) 'Parental involvement in education among low-income families: a case study', *School Community Journal* 16(1): 43–56.	6 - 14 years	X		X		X			X			
13. Sylva, K. et al (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report. A longitudinal study funded by the DfES 1997–2004*, London: DfES.	3 - 5 years			X	EPPE	X			X		X	
14. Sylva, K., Scott, S. et al (2008) 'Training parents to help their children read: a randomized controlled trial', *British Journal of Educational*	5 - 6 years old				SPOKES						X	X

Psychology 78(3): 435–55.												
15. Wigfall, V. (2006) 'Bringing back community: family support from the bottom up,' *Children & Society*, 20(1), 17–29.	4 - 16 years				Families in focus	X						
Totals		7	3	5		10		2	7	9	10	10